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PROLOGUE

The Battle

Dawn broke early over the heart of England. On the ridge, campfires burned in the grey half-light.

Already King Richard's officers were awake, rousing their men to pull on their armour. The jangle of harnesses, the twang of bowstrings, the ring of hammers drifted through the morning air.

Above the King's tent the flags of England and St George fluttered alongside his personal banner, the fierce-tusked white boar. As his captains gathered for their final instructions, Richard Plantagenet stood framed in the entrance. A servant held his helmet, with its glittering golden crown.

Richard III had been king for barely two years. He was a ruthless, unsparing man. For almost all his life, England had been at war, torn apart by the great families' lust for the throne.

Men said Richard had murdered his little nephews to get his hands on the crown. The two boys had vanished from the Tower of London, never to be seen again.

But Richard knew a king could have no room in his

heart for pity. Victory went to the man who took risks, who moved first and was not afraid to shed blood.

Now, after the long years of war, almost all his rivals were dead. There was just one contender left, a young Welsh adventurer with a rag-tag army.

For the last few days, Richard had pursued his prey across England. And by the morning of 22 August 1485, near the village of Bosworth, Leicestershire, he had found him.

Now Richard stared down at the rebels below, his eyes clear and cold.

In just a few hours, he told his captains, they would be celebrating their crowning victory. Their enemy was a 'Welsh milksop' leading a gang of 'traitors, thieves, outlaws and renegades'.

Now Richard raised his voice. 'This day I will triumph by glorious victory,' he cried, 'or suffer death for immortal fame!'

A great roar rose from the royal army. Their swords gleamed in the morning sun. This was it: the last battle.



On the plain below, the rebels, too, were moving. Few of them had managed to get much sleep.

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Beneath his Red Dragon banner, a slender young man with sharp, thoughtful eyes gazed up at the royal army. Born in Wales, Henry Tudor had spent most of his life on the run.

His father had been killed before he was born. Sheltered by his uncle, he had spent years hiding across the sea, in France and Brittany.

Two weeks earlier Henry had landed in Wales with a little band of sea-soaked followers, hoping to gather support as he went along. But few men had rallied to his banners. By the time he reached Bosworth, his ranks had grown to just five thousand, barely half of the size of King Richard's army.

Henry had always been a cautious, careful man. Now, as he pulled on his armour, he knew his future had come down to this last despairing stand.

For days he had been sending messages to the most powerful noble family in England, the Stanleys, begging for support. Across the fields he could make out their soldiers' battle-red surcoats in the dawn half-light.

But the Stanleys had made no move to join the rebels. Deep down, Henry knew they were waiting to see which side proved the stronger.

As his captains gathered around him, he searched for the right words. 'Remember,' he said, 'that victory is not won with the multitudes of men, but with the courage of hearts and the valiantness of minds.

'Let us therefore fight like invincible giants, and banish all fears like ramping lions. And now advance forward, true

men against traitors, true inheritors against usurpers, the scourges of God against tyrants!’

Cheers rang through the rebel ranks. But as Henry lowered his visor, he could feel the fear building inside him.

All his life he had been the plaything of fate. But now, when it mattered most, it seemed his luck had run out.



Cannon fire thundered around the field of Bosworth. King Richard’s foot soldiers were streaming downhill, their voices raised in bloodcurdling battle-cries.

Halfway down the hill, the two lines met in a clash of steel. Everywhere men were falling, shouting, screaming, dying.

Henry Tudor’s men were fighting valiantly, but they were badly outnumbered. They had not yet been broken, but it was surely only a matter of time.

In mounting desperation, Henry looked across the fields to the red ranks of the Stanleys. Still their men stood and waited.

Now he saw movement on the crest of the slope, a flash of silver in the morning sun. Richard’s knights were charging, their red banners streaming in the breeze, the air ringing with their triumphant war-songs.

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Frozen in horror, Henry watched them sweep around the main battle. Moments later, galloping at full speed, they were on him.

With a sickening, splintering crash, the knights slammed into Henry's little group. And at their head was a figure in gleaming armour, his blood-stained battle-axe rising and falling, his helmet encircled with glinting gold.

It was Richard. Onwards he came, unstoppable, invincible, his eyes glittering with the joy of slaughter.

Henry's head was spinning, his horse rearing in fear. The Red Dragon banner was down, trampled underfoot. Richard was barely a spear's length away now.

And suddenly, in the distance, as if from another world, Henry heard voices crying in surprise and anger. He turned his head, and saw an oncoming storm of men in scarlet, a tide sweeping Richard's knights to their deaths.

With an unutterable surge of relief and joy, Henry knew he was saved. The Stanleys had come at last.

Richard, too, had turned to face the newcomers. He was laying about him with his axe, raging furiously against the turn of fortune, his hoarse voice screaming: 'Treason! Treason!'

But there were too many of them now, pushing him back, hemming him in. His horse lost its footing. Blows rained down.

The last Plantagenet was on the ground, fighting to get up. His helmet had come loose. Swords and halberds were coming at him out of the sky.

Then thunder crashed inside Richard's head, and there was only darkness.*



A few minutes later, Henry, too, was on his knees, his face streaked with sweat and mud, his eyes closed in prayer. The sound of battle was fading now. It was over.

He raised his head, and looked up. Lord Stanley was coming towards him, with something in his hand.

One of his men had found it in a hawthorn bush, he said. It must have rolled loose when the tyrant's helmet had come off.

The crown looked so thin, so delicate, its pale gold gleaming in the noonday sun. This was what it had all been for.

Reverently, almost gently, Lord Stanley placed the golden circlet on the new King's head. And as Henry VII, first of the Tudors, rose to his feet, the cheers echoed across the fields of England.



* Lost for centuries, Richard's body was found in 2012 beneath a Leicester car park. It was probably not the fate he would have wanted.

Prologue: The Battle

In the last years of the fifteenth century, every man and woman in the land knew the story of the wheel of fortune. One moment you were at the top, enjoying wealth, fame and good luck. But before you knew it, fate had turned the wheel again, sending you plunging into disgrace and despair.

‘And thus does Fortune’s wheel turn treacherously,’ wrote the poet Geoffrey Chaucer in his book *The Canterbury Tales*, ‘and out of happiness bring men to sorrow.’

Rarely, though, had the wheel turned as dramatically as it did at Bosworth. In a few hours, on a field in Leicestershire, England’s history had changed for ever.

With Henry’s victory, the long years of civil war were over. A new age – the age of the Tudors – had begun.

But even as the crown gleamed on Henry VII’s brow, the wheel continued to turn. And this book tells the story of what happened next.

It is the story of Henry’s son: the second Tudor king, Henry VIII, and of the six women who married him.

This younger Henry was one of the most magnetic characters in English history. Tall, handsome, charming and clever, a fine musician and a magnificent sportsman, he was also grasping, impulsive, suspicious and cruel.

He began his reign as the dashing image of knightly chivalry. He ended it as a bloated, stinking whale, hated and feared across the land.

But in his determination to honour his father’s victory and preserve the Tudor dynasty, Henry VIII changed England in ways that still echo today.

Around him he gathered a host of colourful personalities.

There was Cardinal Wolsey, greedy, ambitious and formidably clever, the butcher's son who became a red-robed mastermind.

There was Thomas More, the ashen-faced fanatic who burned his enemies at the stake, but who was revered across Europe for choosing to risk death himself rather than betray his principles.

And there was Thomas Cromwell, the grand master of secrets and spies, determined to transform England for ever by breaking the grip of the Roman Catholic Church.

One by one, these men soared to spectacular peaks of wealth and power. But then the wheel of fortune turned, and the sword of Nemesis came swooping down.

Above all, though, this is the story of the six women who became Henry's wives.

Catherine of Aragon – the Spanish princess who found herself trapped and betrayed, far from home, but summoned the courage to fight on to the end.

Anne Boleyn – witty and edgy, clever and cruel, the diplomat's daughter who stole a king's heart but saw her dreams of glory collapse in treachery and horror.

Jane Seymour – gentle, modest and kind, the fair young woman who bore Henry the son he wanted but whose story ended in terrible tragedy.

Anne of Cleves – the frightened girl from a German castle, cruelly humiliated and cast aside, who turned herself into the great survivor of the Tudor court.

Catherine Howard – the pretty, giggly teenager who

Prologue: The Battle

loved music and dancing, boys and parties, but was dragged to her death in heart-rending terror.

Catherine Parr – thoughtful, brave and shrewd, the nobleman's widow who discovered a plot to overthrow her and lived to tell the tale.

These were the six wives of Henry VIII, whose stories changed England for ever.

In their different ways, they were all extraordinary women. All six have their admirers, and people still love to debate their relative merits today.

Enough. On with the story.



The scene changes; the sunlight fades. Four months have passed, and the battlefield of Bosworth is behind us now.

Winter has come, and in a far distant land, a warrior queen is expecting a child.

So begins the tale of Catherine of Aragon, the girl from Castile.

PALACES, HOUSES

1. The More, Hertfordshire
2. Hatfield, Hertfordshire
3. Buckden, Huntingdonshire
4. Kimbolton, Huntingdonshire
5. Wolf Hall, Wiltshire
6. Syon, Isleworth

Part of
Scotland

FLODDEN



York

Doncaster

Louth



Lincoln

Leicester



Ludlow



Walsingham



Wales

4

3

Ipswich



Richmond

London



1

2

Esher

Rochester

5 Dogmersfield

Canterbury

Exeter

Portsmouth

Plymouth



PART ONE

CATHERINE OF ARAGON

I

The Girl from Castile

On the dusty plain of the Kingdom of Castile, in the centre of what is now Spain, stands the town of Alcalá de Henares.

It is a town of narrow, cobbled streets and leafy, shaded squares, of splendid stone palaces and soaring church towers. In the summer, when its pale stone bakes beneath the blazing sun, Alcalá's squares are full of people, laughing and gossiping in the shaded cafes.

But this story begins in winter, four months after the Battle of Bosworth.

It was a grey, chilly day. The weak sun struggled to break through the clouds. For weeks the rain had hammered down, turning the roads to mud. As the wind whipped in from the plain, the townsfolk hurried along the winding alleys, too cold to linger long.

But in the town's most splendid building, the Archbishop's Palace, all was excitement. Queen Isabella was expecting a child. And on 16 December 1485, the courtiers waiting outside the royal apartment heard the high, shrill cry of a newborn infant.

The news spread quickly. God had given Isabella a little girl. It had not been easy; but the Lord be praised, both mother and daughter were well.

Soon the streets of Alcalá were alive with celebrations. With Christmas only nine days away, it was party season anyway, but now the lords and ladies of Castile had another reason to dance and sing.

As for the little girl, she was healthy and strong, with perfect white skin and the first wisps of red-blond hair. Her mother called her Catalina, after her own grandmother. But history remembers her as Catherine of Aragon.

From the moment she emerged bawling into the world, Catherine had an exceptional destiny. She was not just any little girl. She was the daughter of Ferdinand, King of Aragon, and Isabella, Queen of Castile, the most celebrated couple in all Europe.

Married when they were teenagers, Catherine's parents had long dreamed of uniting their separate kingdoms into a single mighty realm of Spain. Year after year they had spent their summers on horseback, leading their armies across the wide southern plains, their swords glittering in the blazing sunlight.

Ferdinand was famously cunning, but Isabella was a truly extraordinary character. At a time when few women were allowed to wield power, she was determined to rule Castile herself, rallying her troops against their age-old enemies, the Moors of the south.

With her mother always on the move, little Catherine

The Girl from Castile

had to get used to life on campaign. Every few days they stayed in a different castle. There was always some new monastery to visit, some new battle to fight. In her first sixteen years, Catherine and her mother celebrated Christmas in thirteen different cities.

Danger was never far away. When Catherine was young, a fire broke out in her mother's camp, and on another occasion Moorish raiders came perilously close to catching them.

Yet, despite her royal blood and adventurous childhood, Catherine was a girl like any other. As a toddler she had a little pushcart to help her walk, and she adored fruit jellies and a sugary drink known as 'rose honey'.

Since she was a princess, she was never short of presents. When she was five, she was given material to make dolls' clothes. When she was six, she was given her first jewellery, a gold headband and some bracelets. And by the time she was nine, she had a chess set and her first high heels – a pair of shoes known as chopines, to keep her feet out of the mud.

Girls did not go to school in those days. But Queen Isabella hired private tutors from Italy, who accompanied the royal family on campaign. Under their supervision, Catherine learned to read and write, not just in Spanish but in Latin, the ancient tongue of the Romans which was still the language of learning and government.

She learned to sing and to draw, to sew shirts and ride horses. She studied heraldry, learning the stories behind noble families' symbols and badges. She even studied the

law, for as a princess she would need to know the rules under which countries were governed.

Every day, Catherine studied the Bible. Her mother took her faith extremely seriously, and expected her daughter to know the teachings of Jesus, the lives of the saints and the history of the early Christians.

But there was time for fun, too. Catherine and her older sister Maria loved to play chess and cards, board games and word games. They had dancing lessons with teachers from neighbouring Portugal.

Perhaps above all, they loved stories of knights and princesses, adventure and chivalry. They enjoyed hearing about the greatest of all Castilian knights, El Cid, who had fought for both the Moors and the Christians.

Of all the books in her mother's library, though, one story above all stood out: the legend of Arthur, the boy who pulled the sword from the stone to become the Once and Future King of Britain.

To children like young Catherine, this was the most inspiring tale of all. In every palace in Europe, minstrels sang of the dashing Knights of the Round Table, the mysterious Merlin, the treacherous Mordred, the handsome Lancelot and the tragic Guinevere – characters whose fame would last for ever.

In the story of Arthur and his doomed court, all human life was there: birth and death, blood and beauty, courage and cruelty, loyalty and betrayal. And running like a scarlet thread through it all was love – a passion inspiring songs and battles, invincible devotion and undying hatred.

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Catherine would not have been human if she had not pictured herself as one of the lovelorn ladies at Arthur's court. But never, not in her wildest dreams, did she imagine how her own love story would turn out.



Nine days before Christmas 1498, Catherine turned thirteen. She was no longer a girl now; she was poised to become a young woman.

Whenever she looked in a mirror, a fashionably pale, oval face gazed back at her. Her eyes were blue and clear; her fair hair fell long and thick, glinting red-gold in the Spanish sun.

She was short and stocky, and nobody ever described her as a great beauty. But there was a likeable calm and seriousness about her, a sense of grace and gravity.

By now, her wanderings were almost at an end. A few months later, as the summer heat began to build, Catherine rode south across the plains of Castile, towards the distant southern mountains.

Her destination was the most celebrated of all Spain's great palaces: the dazzling jewel of the Alhambra, in the city of Granada.

Nestling beneath the snow-capped peaks of the Sierra

Nevada, Granada was a rich melting pot of mosques, churches and synagogues, where Muslims, Christians and Jews worshipped side by side.

For centuries it had been the capital of the Moorish Emirs, the last of the great Muslim dynasties who ruled the sweltering south. But gradually the Christian kings had fought their way into the mountains, driving their enemies back.

The end had come at the beginning of 1492, when Catherine was just six years old. After a gruelling siege, the last Emir of Granada surrendered the keys to Ferdinand and Isabella and rode sadly out of the city.

According to legend, the Emir stopped on a mountain peak, looked back at his beloved city, and wept. 'You cry like a woman,' his aged mother said scornfully, 'for what you could not defend like a man.'

Catherine rode into the city on the second day of July 1499, in the heat and dust of midsummer. From the slender towers of the city's mosques, the Muslim call to prayer echoed through the streets. But Catherine's destination was the walled citadel overlooking the city – the Alhambra.

Built more than a century earlier, the Alhambra was already shrouded in legend. On its high, rocky outcrop, behind its honey-coloured walls, the Moors had built a paradise of marble courtyards and painted ceilings, crystal-perfect pools and gently bubbling fountains, lush lemon trees and fragrant orange blossom.

Here at last, Catherine and her parents made their

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home. And for a thirteen-year-old girl, wandering in the gardens as the prayer-calls drifted across the city below, the Alhambra seemed like a fairy tale.

Yet, all the time, Catherine knew that this was just a short-lived dream of beauty, from which she would soon awake.

As a princess, her destiny had been laid down from the moment she was born. It was her duty to make a marriage that would strengthen the glory of Spain, no matter where that path would take her.

Even as their daughter was learning to walk, Ferdinand and Isabella had been planning her future. And as they gazed at the map of Europe, there seemed an obvious candidate.

A thousand miles to the north, Henry Tudor's kingdom was a natural ally for their united Spanish realm. The two lands had much in common – above all, a deep suspicion of the country between them: rich, boastful France.

Henry's eldest son was only a year younger than Catherine, which made him the ideal match. And as luck would have it, he had been christened after the legendary king whose adventures had inspired minstrels in every corner of Europe.

His name was Arthur.



Catherine always knew her destiny lay in England. Her parents had signed the contract for her to marry young Arthur Tudor when she was just three.

Back then, you didn't get married just because you fell in love. For many people, marriage was a business deal, designed to make your family richer, more powerful and more respected.

For princes and princesses, contracts were often agreed when they were children. If, later on, the couple fell in love, that was a bonus. If not, they just had to get on with it.

Catherine had never been to England. But she knew it was cold and wet, a land of strange people, strange habits and even stranger food. She also knew the English spoke a weird language of their own invention, very unlike elegant European languages, such as Spanish.

When Catherine was twelve, Arthur's mother, Elizabeth of York, sent her some useful advice. Nobody in England spoke a word of Spanish, she said, so Catherine should learn some French, so that people would understand her. For some reason, it never occurred to anyone that she could just learn English.

Elizabeth's other tip was that Catherine should get used to drinking wine. 'The water of England,' she explained sadly, 'is not drinkable.'

By now, what had once seemed a very distant prospect was looming larger on the horizon. The future couple had even started sending each other love letters in Latin.

In October 1499, the thirteen-year-old Arthur told his fiancée that her letters made him so happy he imagined

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he was already kissing his 'dearest wife'. He could not wait to see her, and cherished the thought of her 'night and day'.

At this stage, Arthur had never even laid eyes on her. This was a kind of game, a ritual of courtly love, and they both knew it.

By now, King Henry was impatient to see his son's Spanish bride. But Ferdinand and Isabella dragged their feet, coming up with endless reasons why Catherine was not ready to travel.

Their other children had all left home, and they hated the thought of losing their youngest. 'Of all my daughters,' Ferdinand once told her, 'you are the one I love best.'

But by the spring of 1501 they had run out of excuses. Catherine was fifteen, and early one bright May morning, the day came.

The sun was high above the streets of Granada. The walls of the Alhambra glowed honey-pink. On the peaks of the Sierra Nevada, the snow glinted in the morning light.

Her travelling party was ready. An archbishop, a bishop, a nobleman and six young ladies were coming with her, all the way to England.

Now, as her companions waited on their horses, Catherine took one last look at the city she loved so much: the fountains and courtyards, the churches and mosques, the sweet-scented blossom, the softly murmuring fountains.

At last, she turned her horse's head and rode out of

the city, towards her new life. She would never see the Alhambra, Granada or her parents again.



Even for a princess, travelling abroad was an exhausting and dangerous business. And although Catherine had set out in the spring, to avoid the worst of the weather, her journey to England took her almost exactly half a year.

It took her three months to ride across the dusty plains to the port of La Coruña, in the far north-west of Spain. Wherever she passed, towns threw banquets and bullfights to honour their departing princess. And as Spain baked in the summer heat, her party slowed almost to a crawl.

Since Catherine had never travelled by sea before, she was understandably nervous. Before taking ship, she made a detour to the great church at Santiago de Compostela, supposedly the last resting place of Jesus's friend St James.

There, like so many Spanish knights before her, she knelt and prayed to the saint for a safe journey. Unfortunately, it turned out that St James was busy with other things.

The princess's ship left La Coruña on 25 August, packed with about sixty people. For the last time, Catherine waved farewell to her homeland – or so she thought.

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But she had been at sea for barely a week when a ferocious storm blew up in the Bay of Biscay. Suddenly they found themselves driven off course, and in the end, the captain was forced to put in at Laredo, further along the Spanish coast.

Later, people said this had been an omen. Catherine, they claimed, had wondered aloud if the storm was a warning from God of 'some calamity' ahead.

But storms in the Bay of Biscay were hardly unusual, even in summer. Not even princesses were safe from the winds and waves that had swept so many sailors to their doom.

A month later, on the evening of 27 September, the gales died down and Catherine's captain was ready to try again. This time the voyage was much smoother – at least at first. But as they rounded the cape of Brittany into the English Channel, the weather turned against them.

What had started as a gentle breeze became a whipping wind, and then a howling gale. The ship pitched violently in the roiling waters. Hammer-blows of thunder shattered the heavens; towering waves hurled themselves onto the deck.

Huddled in her cabin, Catherine was racked with terrible seasickness. So were her terrified young companions, who sank to their knees in desperate prayer.

Fortunately, the captain knew his job. The plan had been for them to head for Southampton, supposedly the safest harbour in England, but he had a better idea.

So it was that at three o'clock on Saturday, 2 October